



Does the Prohibition to Disrespect One's Parents Apply to Psychotherapy?

ארור מקלה אביו ואמו ואמר כל העם אמן (דברים כז, טז)

"Accursed is one who degrades his father or mother. And the entire people shall say Amen." (Devarim 27:16)

According to *Rashi*, the word "*Makleh*" means "*Mezalzel*" – to degrade and the root of the word is "*Kal*" meaning "*light or unimportant*". The Pasuk intends to curse a person who considers his parent to be inconsequential and not worthy of honor. This is also the understanding of *Targum Yonasan* and *Rabenu Yona (Sha'arey Teshuva 21)*. *Ibn Ezra* holds that the root of the word *Makleh* is "*Klon*" which means "disgrace", and the Pasuk refers to a child who relates to his parents in a degrading manner.

The *Rambam (Hilchos Mamrim 5:15)* clearly references this transgression in the following Halacha:

The Torah does not only caution (a person) against striking or cursing (his parents) but also against disgracing them. For anybody who disgraces his father or mother, even with words, or hints, is included in the curse of "accursed is one who degrades his father or mother". And it also says "the eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey its mother." (Mishley 30:17). Beis Din should give a person lashes for this and punish him as they see fit.

The *Radvaz* explains the reason that the *Rambam* cites the Pasuk in *Mishley* (considering that he had already cited a Pasuk in the Torah) is to prove that a person is not only censured for *acting* disrespectfully to his parents, but even for merely *hinting* at his disrespect for them. "*The eye that mocks a father*" refers to a disrespectful wink or other form of mockery. This is also cited by the *Shulchan Aruch (Y.D. 241:6)*



When it comes to respecting one's parents, the Torah is much stricter than in regard to other people. For example, mocking someone's speech or dress is not an *Issur d'Oraysa*, but when it is directed at a parent, the Torah curses the child. This is alluded to by the Pasuk in *Mishley* that condemns a person who is "*Tavuz Likhas Eim*" - mocks his mother's wrinkles¹.

The punishment for a person who disrespects his parents in this manner is written explicitly at the end of that same Pasuk which states: "*The ravens of the stream will gouge it (the mocking eye) out and the young eagles will eat it*". *Sefer Charedim (Mitzvas Aseh 81:35)* tells of a man who supported his widowed mother, although she was completely insignificant in his eyes as she had married somebody else after his father's death. This son went overseas and was killed and thrown into the sea and the Jewish people searched for his body in order to bury him. They found him on a beach and they saw that one of his eyes had been *gouged out by ravens!*

The *Sefer Charedim*² also writes that the curse on a person who is "*Makleh Aviv v'Imo*" applies to somebody who *thinks degradingly of his parents in his heart!* He asserts that this should make a person tremble in fear lest he slightly disrespect them. A person must try to imagine that his parents are the most important and honorable people in the world, as the greatest form of honoring them is to consider them as uniquely respectable – even if others do not. When he thinks this way, says the *Sefer Chareidim*, he will find it easy to hold them in esteem and will not disrespect them, even inwardly.

According to the Chafetz Chaim (Introduction, *Mitzvos Aseh 10*), *Makleh Aviv v'Imo* also prohibits relating *Lashon Hara* about one's parents (for example, speaking disparagingly about them behind their backs). Furthermore, if a person deliberately upsets them knowing that they will forgive the slight to their honor, he has also transgressed this sin.

What about shaming or blaming parents during psychotherapy? It is common for patients to blame their parents for many or all of their problems in the course of psychotherapy, often in a most disrespectful manner. Is doing so permissible, or would it be subject to the curse of *Arur Makleh Aviv v'Imo*?

¹ See *Rashi* and *Ramban* on *Breishis 49:10*

² Cited by the *Chida (Shiyurei Bracha 241)*. See also *Ben Ish Chai, Shanah Beis, Shoftim 22*.



Although we will distinguish between two different dynamics that can exist in therapy, let us first lay out the basic Halacha as stated in *Shulchan Aruch* (Y.D. 240:8):

"To what extent is the Mitzva of honoring one's father and mother? Even if he (the father) takes his (the son's) wallet of gold coins and throws it into the sea in front of him, he shall neither shame nor upset him, nor shall he show anger in front of him. Rather, he should accept the Torah's decree and keep quiet."

The Rema adds:

"Some say, that if he (the father) wants to throw his son's money into the sea, that it is permitted (for the son) to prevent him (from doing so), for (the son) is not obligated to honor him (using his own money) but with the father's own money. There is no difference between honoring him and causing him pain (Terumas haDeshen)."

The Rema implies that a son may shame his father, or, perhaps, even physically accost him, in order to prevent him from causing a financial loss. Usually, acting in that way would be a clear act of *Makleh Aviv v'Imo*, yet the *Rema* permits it if his father is about to cause a monetary loss.

Does the *Shulchan Aruch* agree with the *Rema*? One might have been tempted to say that he would. Perhaps the *Shulchan Aruch's* ruling (instructing a son who witnesses his father throwing his money into the sea to remain silent) refers only to a case where there was nothing the son could have done to prevent his father's actions. In such a case, the *Rema* would also agree that it would be forbidden to shame his father, but if some form of intervention is possible, perhaps all would agree that it is permissible.

However, it is apparent from the *Beis Yosef* that the *Mechaber* in fact disputes this leniency of the *Rema*. He holds like the *Rambam* (and other *Rishonim*) that the law that one does not need to incur a loss in order to perform the Mitzva of honoring his parents applies only to actively honoring them. Nevertheless, there is no such leniency that would allow someone to shame his parents in order to prevent a loss³.

³ This is the *Beis Yosef's* interpretation of the *Rambam*. The *Smag* (*Mitzvos Aseh* 12) and *Meiri* (*Kidushin* 32a) write similarly. However, the *Bach* (*ad. loc.*) maintains that the *Rambam* agrees that if it is possible to save oneself from suffering a loss at the hands of



To recap, according to the *Shulchan Aruch*, while the Mitzva of honoring one's parents does not obligate a child to use his own funds, the prohibition of degrading or shaming them requires him to suffer a loss and not shame them. However, according to the *Rema*, there is no such distinction. The prohibition of shaming one's parents (or even to physically prevent them from causing him a loss) is no different than the Mitzva to honor them. Just as one needn't expend any money to honoring his parents, one is not forbidden to shame his parents if abstaining from doing so will cause a financial loss.

However, it is self-evident that if a person's parent has already caused him a loss, even the *Rema* would agree that it is forbidden to shame him and that doing so would be subject to the curse of "*Arur Makleh Aviv v'Imo*".

There are two distinct dynamics that can exist in the psychotherapeutic setting, particularly in the psychoanalytical approach. Most common is the tendency of people to blame their parents for any or all of their problems and difficulties, claiming that they did not know how to raise them, were overly strict with them, or other similar complaints. Often, later in life, when they mature or become parents themselves, their views change and they see their parents' approach to raising them in a new light.

In these cases, the child's juvenile attitude towards his parents and his disrespect for them, may well mean that he has violated the sin of "*Arur Makleh Aviv v'Imo*". Were he to have genuinely respected his parents, he wouldn't have blamed them and demeaned them.

However, there are cases when a parent has caused actual harm to a child that resulted in ongoing or persistent trauma that he will suffer from for the rest of his life without psychotherapy. In such cases, one of the first stages of the therapeutic process is to help the child recognize that the parent was the aggressor and that he was the unfortunate victim. Without doing so, a child may blame or even detest himself, despite the blame lying squarely upon the parent.

This phase of psychological counseling is imperative – without it the patient's recovery will be impeded. It is vital that he understand the gravity of his parent's

one's parents then it is permitted to shame them. The *Rambam* only forbade acting as such in a case where it would have been possible to prevent the loss in another way such as by taking him to Beis Din afterwards. See also *Shita Lo Noda l'Mi* (*Kidushin ad. loc.*) who relates a similar ruling in the name of the *Raavad*.



terrible actions and, in fact, he must be given the chance to express his anger (or hatred) towards his parent. Only then can he embark upon a pathway and develop a mechanism for recovery and cure⁴.

The patient is thus left with only an illusion of choice. He could choose to speak degradingly of his parents (obviously in confidence with the therapist) and perhaps begin to hate them for their behavior. This will allow him to begin the process of healing and possibly sow the seeds for the eventual normalization of the relationship with his parents. On the other hand, he could refrain from speaking about his parents in this way, not judge them harshly, and bury everything in the recesses of his memory. However, doing so would prevent him from improving his mental state and may lead to him to continue to blame himself for all of his problems which could result in depression and other serious mental illness for the rest of his life.

A child's mental state is surely no less important than his money or possessions. Therefore, the ruling of the Rema and Bach that permit the shaming of a parent in order to avoid a loss, surely applies equally to interminable mental distress and suffering. While the original harm caused by the parent is in the past, its effects last long into the future. Through psychotherapy a person may figuratively "*raise his wallet of gold coins from the bottom of the sea*". Avoiding psychotherapy would lead to a persistent and perpetual loss.

Therefore, in spite of the dire warnings of the *Sefer Chareidim* to consider in one's heart that one's parents are the most honorable people in the world, it is nevertheless permitted (and advisable) for those who have suffered traumatic experiences at the hands of their parents, to undergo psychological counseling even if that means relating to the parents in a disrespectful manner.

It is also important to consider the long-term benefits of therapy to the parent-child relationship. Without it, a child may succeed in putting up a pretense of *Kibud Av va'Eim*, but he will never genuinely revere or respect them. However, if he heals from the trauma that they caused, though he may go through an interim stage of deep revulsion for his parents, he may eventually be able to build a stronger and genuinely respectful relationship with them.

⁴ Our thanks to psychiatrist Dr. Yaakov Freedman for his contributions to this article.